

Home & Garden Television's Ken Lowe

This young entrepreneur created the first 24-hour, 7-days-a-week network devoted to "cocooning" enthusiasts.



Ken Lowe built radio station WGOB ("gobs of musical fun") in Westfield, North Carolina, as his first career move. True, the tiny station's range stretched only 3 miles and ad sales consisted of traded goods.

But the venture signaled the future for the 10-year-old boy. For instance, the half-pint entrepreneur displayed remarkable business acumen when he chose his colleagues. "I told one of the guys he could be a disc jockey—even though his accent was thick as grits—because his dad was the local TV repairman," says Ken, who envisioned pilfered parts for the station. "The other guy was a record collector and had the 45s we needed." WGOB even boasted a sweet-toothed little girl who cheerfully greeted patrons as long as Ken kept her in candy bars.

So it surprised no one when he founded the Home & Garden Television



(HGTV) cable network in Knoxville. Certainly not his high school guidance counselor, Beulah Perkins.

"On home-game nights, he would play basketball, finish by 10 p.m., then report to the local radio station until midnight," says the retired educator. There, the talented teen spun platters as a disc jockey. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ken began radio station

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HGTV founder
Ken Lowe on the
media: "I know
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But we can
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WILD with his friend and roommate Rick Dees, now a radio and TV personality in Los Angeles.

"He played basketball and football and dated the cheerleaders," Rick remembers. "I'm sure all the guys hated him, but they couldn't hate him long because he was such a nice guy."

Tall, dark, and handsome is a trite but true description of Ken. His frequent laugh punctuates a brandy snifter drawl. Now 46, the man sleeps only three or four hours each night, a life-long practice acquired growing up on a farm.

While the rest of the world snoozes, Ken envisions the future. "I have a pretty good 'gut' for sensing what's going to happen next," he admits. His instincts honed in on the need for HGTV, the first 24-hour, 7-days-a-week network devoted to home and garden enthusiasts. From novice to expert, viewers gobble info on building and remodeling, decorating and interior design, gardening and landscaping, crafts and hobbies, and special interests.

"My wife, Mary, and I have built three houses together," Ken says. Both information hounds, the Lowes deplored leaving de-

BELOW: "Why sleep?" Ken says of his penchant for sleeping only three or four hours nightly. "There's too much life, too much to enjoy, too much to do." Colleague Carol Hicks jokes, "That's what he expects of everybody who works with him too."



tails such as wiring, skylights, or landscaping to others. "I'm probably a frustrated architect," says Ken. Mary is an avid gardener.

With Ken's broadcasting ties, the fertile HGTV idea naturally took root. At the time, Ken worked for Scripps Howard Broadcasting in Cincinnati. Convinced the parent corporation, E.W. Scripps Co., wouldn't be interested, he and Mary planned to leave.

But the venerable institution surprised him. "Media companies like ours are going to rise or fall on the degree to which they own good content," explains Frank Gardner, senior vice president with the Scripps Howard Broadcasting Division in Cincinnati. "And a good idea from within is certainly the most valuable commodity you've got."

Frank and Ken went to dinner to discuss the HGTV concept. "We were both pacing around the table, writing on the back of napkins, literally disrupting the whole place," Frank remembers. "Ken had a tru-

ly fleshed-out, very detailed highly textured vision, which he had been thinking about for years."

Scripps invested \$75 million in Ken's idea, including the purchase of Cinetel Productions in Knoxville. The fledgling network expects to turn a profit within four to five years of its December 30, 1994, launch. HGTV now reaches more than 25 million homes, with a commitment to add 6 million more.

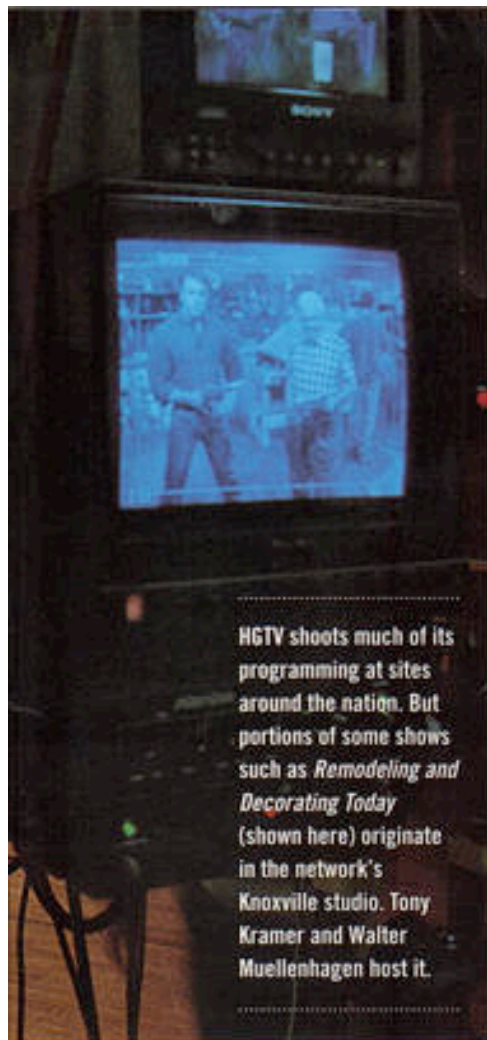
"The one thing we didn't anticipate was how addicted some of these viewers would be," says Ken.

Carol Hicks, director of public relations, theorizes, "You can turn on HGTV anytime and nobody is screaming at you, there's no violence. It's family oriented."

A letter from a young woman describes how she inherited her grandfather's tools, but never had anyone to teach her how to use them—until HGTV. "We gave her the courage to get those tools out of storage," Ken says.

Another viewer was so proud of what she'd learned from the net-





HGTV shoots much of its programming at sites around the nation. But portions of some shows such as *Remodeling and Decorating Today* (shown here) originate in the network's Knoxville studio. Tony Kramer and Walter Muellenhagen host it.

work that she came to an HGTV ad sales meeting with a color copy presentation of her handiwork.

Part of that viewer loyalty stems from credible hosts. Single mom Beverly DeJulio teams with daughter Chris to demonstrate simple home decorating and repairs anyone can do. Weatherman Willard Scott invites viewers to his Virginia farm and all over the country to visit unusual gardens and homes. Grandmother Lucille Treganowan pulls out a stethoscope and diagnoses car ailments. (She's even given car tuning tips to David Letterman on his late-night show and to Tim Allen from *Home Improvement*.) Glue-gun guru Carol Duvall shares both failures and successes. "These folks get down and dirty," Carol Hicks says. "You see them spill the paint."

The same candor and enthusiasm permeate the corporate culture at HGTV headquarters. Its lake is equipped with paddleboats for employee use. But back inside, long working hours com-



ABOVE: The Lowes: Mary, Ziggie, and Ken. Ken credits Mary for her support during the idea and implementation stages of HGTV.

bine with a palpable frenetic pace.

"We think our hours are 8:30 to 5:30. However, none of us have experienced that yet," laughs Carol, who generally works until 7:30 each night. "It's not that Ken's asking you to do that; it's just that he's hired people who are really excited about what they're doing."

Ken explains it this way: "When we were hiring people, I said, 'I promise you two things: I'll always be honest with you, good and bad news; and we're not going to hire bad people—in the sense of disgruntled, don't-want-to-be-here people—no matter how brilliant.'"

He credits the network's successes to the 200 or so employees. But Carol says, "Everything is Ken's idea. There is never a program created that he hasn't signed off on." "Ken bombs," yellow sticky notes found in mailboxes on Monday mornings, result from the boss's tendency to pull marathon weekends packed with channel flipping, voracious reading, and nocturnal noodling on the next step for HGTV.

As his long-legged gait carries him through the HGTV corridors, Ken greets employees by name. "From the new vice president to the janitor, Ken knows them," Carol says. "Everybody gets a birthday card from Ken."

Values he learned as a farmer's

son ground his leadership views. "In Westfield, it didn't matter how financially successful somebody was," Ken says. "It mattered more that you got the crop in before the rains. That's probably been a better learning experience than how to put together program deals in Hollywood."

His candid, caring personality rings true as he brings grand visions to life. Whether it's HGTV or WGOB, the spirit of a bright, ambitious 10-year-old still drives Ken Lowe. *Nancy Dorman-Hickson*

Homing In On HGTV

According to HGTV, Americans spend over \$587 billion annually on home and garden areas.

- Viewers: 53% female, 47% male
- U.S. audience: 25 million homes, with a commitment for 6 million more in the near future
- Geographic reach: U.S., Canada, Europe, and plans for Australian expansion
- Spinoffs: *LivingHome* quarterly CD-ROM magazine; the bimonthly *Ideas* magazine; and on-line service, Home Video Library, (<http://www.hgtv.com>)
- Questions: 1-800-HGTV-ASK